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ABSTRACT

Prison language, primarily the lexicon, at the Women's Correctional Center (WCC) in Columbia, South Carolina is described. This center is considered here as a speech community and a subculture. Inmates have developed speech habits and vocabulary which indicate the social structure of the prison and inmate values. They coin or metaphorically extend words to describe life in their environment. Physical locations, guards, the inmates themselves, and their activities and behavior are categorized and named by the participants in this community. The argot of various subcultures, regional variants, and the language of the dominant culture are intermixed. Two main topics of discussion, sex and criminal offense, yield especially interesting argot. The language also reflects the inmates' social or occupational roles in the prison. (Author/AMH)

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Getting Acclimated: Language in a Women's Prison

In Language, Bloomfield describes how groups of speakers, isolated from each other geographically or socially, may develop modes of speech not readily understood by those who communicate with them infrequently (Bloomfield 1933: Chapter 3). What do these differences tell about the speakers and the social structure of their community? This paper will summarize my preliminary study of the lexicon of the residents at the Women's Correctional Center or WCC in Columbia, South Carolina. The study also indicates that research of this sort can provide an opportunity to correlate speech, environment, and behavior and show linguistic patterns as interpretative indices of a culture. For the past seven months, I have been able to observe inmate behavior and speech through my teaching and coordinating activities at WCC. During this time, I have gathered data through informal discusssions with inmates, research by the inmates themselves, and formal interviews. I am currently conducting more interviews to gather additional data and explore further the relationship of language to the behavior of the inmates and the social structure of the prison.

The Women's Correction Center may be considered a speech community and a subculture. John J. Gumperz has defined a linguistic community as "a social group which may be either morolingual or multilingual, held together by frequency of social interaction patterns and set off from the

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surrounding areas by weakness in lines of communication " (Gumperz 1968: 463). While most residents at WCC eventually return to the dominant culture, their stay at the prison marks a break with it. David W. Maurer, who has studied argot in several underworld groups, finds that "Speech patterns reflect the behavior patterns of the group, as well as the traditions and group subculture. These argots are keys to the behavior patterns as well as the techniques used by various specialized criminal groups" (Maurer 1971: 500-1). Linguistic research has shown that thieves or other groups often assure secrecy by assigning special meanings to common nouns, verbs, and adjectives (Gumperz 1971:117). The lexicon of the residents of WCC contains semantic extensions designed for similar purposes. Prison language may change at WCC as new members come to the community of tension rises within the institution. In addition, regional dialects and the argots of various subcultural groups also influence speech of the women. Since an inmate's movement is restricted, terms used in one part of the prison or within a particular group may differ from the slang elsewhere in the institution.

WCC, or Women's Criminal College as its residents say, is South Carolina's only state prison for women. It is a mimimum security institution or an open institution. All female offenders in this state who must serve a sentence of 90 days of longer come here. Its capacity is 168; however, 257 women currently reside there. Of these, 150 are black and 107 white. The women are incarcerated for a variety of offenses, some of which are described in the prison argot: a grease gun or an armed robber is said to have pulled a caper; an artist, paper hanger, or interior decorator is a forgerer; a hustler, a prostitute; and a rip-off artist, a specialist in small larceny or shoplifting. Some of these terms are the

traditional ones from older thieves' argot. The most and least prestigious crimes, murder and child abuse respectively, have no slang names.

Prison argot at WCC is usually spoken only among the inmates themselves. A newcomer must adjust to new people and surroundings and learn a different linguistic code. One resident wrote about her adjustment to prison language:

> I really had a surprise in store when I arrived. . . The speech was completely different to any I had ever been exposed to. . .
> One morning in the cafeteria a black girl asked the girl I was sitting at the table with, 'Hey, Porter, she your new bitch?' The black girl laughed while I did a slow burn. . . I didn't take long for me to catch on or wise up. Sex was a topic of discussion. In receiving one girl asked me if I wanted to get down when the lights went out. I told her the only getting down I did was when I got down on my knees to pray. I don't think she liked my reply because she cursed me and called me a worn out old broad, but she never bothered me again.

As the following examples will show, language at WCC indicates both the social structure of the prison and inmate life and the values of its speakers.

Naturally the inmates have a number of words which refer to prison structure and activities. A group of administrative personnel, or a classification committee, determines much of an inmate's activity and work. If any inmate violates a prison rule, called an infraction, she usually goes before the adjustment committee and will be subjected to various punishments. She may be put on restriction, which inclues a limitation of her movements, or assigned additional detail, housekeeping chores in the cottage or elsewhere on the prison grounds. Her custody rating may be affected, a situation the inmates describe as dropping back to zero or starting from scratch. Inmates begin with a C custody and gradually advance; advancement is determined by behavior and the length of a sentence. An inmate is likely to describe her custody status as "I'm a B grader."

These ratings are C,B,A, and double A. If the number of terms provides an index to the values of a community, administrative segregation, which is confinement in a section separated from the general population, is important, having several synomyns. Administrative segregation is the official term; however, the inmates refer to such confinement as Blueberry Hill, maximum security, behind the black door, up on the hill, in the hole, detention, and lock up. In contrast to appearances before the adjustment committee, an inmate may return to big court, court outside the prison. An any time, an inmate may be subjected to a shakedown, which is a search of her person and room for any type of contraband, such as hair spray, drugs, food, or stolen goods, rip off items. Shakedowns differ in degree; they may be a patting down, a strip search, or a physical shakedown, which includes disrobing and a pelvic and rectum examination.

Each resident must decide whether to stay and complete her sentence or take her chances at escaping. No walls surround WCC, which makes escape accessible and tempting. There are several expressions for escape. A resident may cut the woods, hit the fence, or simply run. She may take a bush parole or a ten-ninety eight. Rabbit fever, the time when most women try to escape, comes in the summer. Inmates tend to generalize about the life they may reach through escape, as outsiders do about life in prison. The most common expressions used to describe this life are free world, on the outside, and on the street. A husband or lover on the outside is usually called an old man, so as not to be confused with new loves found in prison. An inmate may have a sugar daddy, a male friend outside the prison who is used to provide money. This role may also be filled by another inmate. Ever loved ones take on a special identity, conjugal visiting

takes place in a location called the rock pile or motel. However, some women may refuse to use this privilege for several reasons. They consider having heterosexual relations in this way degrading or have the hots for a compound stud, a love affair with another woman in prison.

Two experiences especially impress the inmates: their loss of freedom and the enforced regimentation of daily life. Here is a subculture where time is nothing, yet everything. The length of a sentence determines an inmate's friends, work assignments, personal possessions, and leisure activities. This important information is commonly sought with the questions: "How much did ya get?" or "What did he give you?" Once a new resident has learned the local lingo she will respond with I'm pullin' two I got a flat seven, or I maxed out. Pullin' two, a flat seven, and two flat mean that the inmate is serving the specified number of years without parole. Inmates may also do, pull, make, build, and buy time. They describe their current situation by saying: I'm doin' time or I'm pullin' time. I plan to make my time means to complete the required sentence and not try to escape. I've gotta build time refers to a specified number of days necessary for receiving a change in custody. Although years might seem endless for a WCC resident, one time, consideration for parole, is especially important. An inmate may quiz another: "When do you go up?" Everyone immediately knows the question: when will a case come before the parole board.

An inmate's conception of the world tends to narrow to the prison community. One inmate described it thus: "That's a big world outside, but for everyone in here this is a mighty small world. . . Everything in here is magnified." Consequently, the women leave their occupations and the

language connected with them on the outside. Within the institution, the inmates' language reflects their concern with adjusting to life in the prison and categorizing others' behavior. "Where's she comin' from?" is the inmate's way of checking upon a fellow resident. Moods fluctuate and a woman may playfully act in a foolish manner or out of character: cut or act the fool. A woman may also play crazy to receive a time cut, a shortening of her sentence. The women at WCC may shoot the breeze, rap, bullshit, or fling slang. The first three are familiar to most of us; the last means to gossip. It is important in this community to be able to recognize if someone is dealin' with you straight or talkin' trash. A woman accepted by a group gets to be all right with them. In order to survive here, a resident must pick up, recognize what is going on around her and know when to speak and what to say.

In WCC, a woman achieves praise or condemnation as a result of her actions; this is ultimately reflected in the language used about her. Perhaps the most despised persons on the compound are women who are informants, known as rats or rat finks. A bloodsucker is a dealer who sells drugs for a profit without using them herself. A woman who takes front money and produces no drugs is a rip off artist, the same title given a shoplifter. Snakes at WCC are women who gain extra money by stealing another inmate's goods and selling them. Hotheads is the usual term for troublemakers. A woman may describe another as white trash, honky, or cracker. She may call someone nigger, which is an insult describing obnoxious people either black or white. A milder label is turkey. A rogue is a nasty person or a thief and a dog, a nasty or ugly woman. These labels are seldom used without expletives surrounding them.

Other words in this prison vernacular describe inmates' behavior or occupation less prejudicially. A little warden is one who views herself as being in a position of authority or superior to other inmates. A hard core woman feels more at home in prison than on the streets. Three words describe occupations: floorwalker, mansion maids, and driver. Floorwalkers are women with a particular job in the apparel plant, mansion maids work at the governor's mansion, and drivers are women in double A custody who drive a state van to transport inmates. Sometimes it is an offender's age which is pertinent to her title; youthful offenders are called YOA's after the Youthful Offender's Act. A woman who becomes very religious in prison and later changes is termed a jailhouse Jesus freak. A resident taking life easy might be described as layin' in the ditch. If she is under the influence of drugs, she would be movin' like a zombie. The women tend to call themselves inmates when they are together; however, the official word is residents. Officials and posted memoranda occasionally address the women as ladies. Here a single word connotes and denotes correction philosophy.

The words of this prison argot indicate a community that is well versed in preying on its members and outsiders. None of the inmates seem to be above duping a prison official. In order to get revenge or trick someone, a woman or her group try to set someone up. Other residents at WCC take delight in doing what is called gaming or running a game on someone. This expression has several meanings, all closely related: to trick someone, to pretend to be something one is not, or to be a person's friend for personal gain. Rustling, using another for gain, is condoned by the residents. A really clever and brave woman may rip the rippers or rob the dope pushers.

Another group of words reflects the violence which is a very real part of life in any prison. One phrase, turn this martha out, may mean either a party or a brawl. A group of women desiring revenge may gang a girl, attacking her as a group. Or they may have a blanket party, wrap an inmate in a blanket and beat her with their fists or other implements. Pranks are common among certain groups within the prison and the degree of the prank is marked by the names trick or mean trick, the latter being spiteful and harmful. The women receiving such razzing may do a slow burn. In order to become a member of this community, a woman got busted, but she may also get busted or take a fall in several ways while in WCC. She may be out of money or do something that is against institutional rules. Under pressure, a woman may cop out, tell what she knows about something or go under cover and become an informant. A final description of an inmate's behavior reflects the stereotyping of the dominant culture; a woman who flirts with other inmates is said to be whorin'around.

Several other titles reveal the social structure of WCC. Since any woman eagerly greets a newcomer from her home, one of the first questions asked of a new inmate is her home county. People from the same geographic location are called homeys, one of the social relationships formed at WCC. However, most social groups are formed on the basis of common leisure activities, work, or living locations. An inmate may designate a member of the group she runs with as roadie. Another important individual is is a person's rap partner, the person with whom she was arrested.

Interestingly enough, a family structure continues in this sexually segregated community. Families are formed as older inmates adopt younger

ones as children or in turn are adopted. The children of these relationships address their new parents in a traditional manner. The adopted parents may be lovers or inmates who have not formed a homosexual union. The children come to their parents for advice and the parents acquaint the younger ones with life in the prison. Such a relationship may even continue after release of one of the participants.

A final relationship formed at WCC is the homosexual dyad. Like the rest of the prison language, the homosexual terms show the combining influence of incarceration and slang of the dominant culture. Although no woman is physically forced to participate in a homosexual relationship or affair, she may chose to do so for a variety of reasons—curiosity, peer pressure, or genuine emotional attachment.

An inmate seldom uses the word homosexual to describe this relationship. Rather, bulldyking, bulldagging, or bullfrogging would be used most frequently. A homosexual relationship is called being tight with someone or going with someone. A woman uninitiated into homosexual activities is termed a bride and may be approached as a prospective partner. As is usual in homosexual jargon, names are found for both the male and female roles. The male partner is called a stud, butch, husband, or little man. To be a stud at WCC is status, as a resident reported: "The woman keep the studs up, just like pimpin' on the streets." The woman is called bitch, which may be stitched across her jacket or the seat of her pants, old lady, or wife. The couple may write each other letters, occasionally using a code. Although I am told such a code exists, I have not yet examined it. The relationship may be formalized by a marriage ceremony complete with cake, minister, and

guests. However, a woman may, like her counterpart on the outside, have many affairs with different women. Such a woman is said to be playin' musicial beds. Group sex at WCC is called a panty raisin' party.

Homosexual activities may take place in a variety of locations. The couples may be roommates— if they are lucky. However, other meeting places are available: record hops in the gymnasium, the grounds surrounding the cottages, one of the partner's rooms, or the infirmary, which is called Lover's Lane. Here the women have more opportunity for culminating affairs. A woman engaging in sexual activity with another is said to be gettin' it on or gettin' down. She may switch her role while in WCC; such women are described as "He ain't for real." Notice the masculine pronoun; a stud becomes a male in as many ways as possible, including dress and mannerisms.

Traditionally, women in American culture refrain from profanity. However, the women at WCC do not. The inmates commonly greet each other in this way and such speech does not reflect anger. In the highly restricted and crowded community of WCC, tension and pressure can be great, so some women find relief in using language that they did not use before and do not use with outsiders. Using profanity is one of the few taboos that a woman may break in prison with the least risk of punishment.

The inmates themselves report that they must change their speech habits to become participants in this community. It is not an environment where one speaks freely. One informant stated: "You monitor every thought before you think it; every word before you say it." Another inmate described the rules of this speech community as:

> Tone of voice has to be used in certain specific ways to make your words understandable. If someone asks to borrow something

> and you wanted to say no, you couldn't use a regular tone of voice. You would have to say 'no' harshly or the borrower would thing you were playing.
>
> Another rule is to always make your words clear. If you mumble something, someone will ask you not so nicely, what you said. It is always best to use simple language. If a word is used that another person doesn't understand and they misinterpret it, a fight could break out.

Why might a linguist be interested in studying a speech community such as WCC? It offers an opportunity to study argot formation and fluctuation and the relationship of slang and standard language. Normally slang does not enter directly into the language of the dominant culture. Such language first exists among the speakers in various subcultures. A prison offers an opportunity to study the input of many different linguistic backgrounds into one speech community. The argot of drug users and offenders, of various criminal specialities, and of homosexuals mixes with regional and social variations as speakers are forced into close relationships with inmates of different backgrounds. Participants in the speech community of WCC rarely coin new words. As Maurer has found of his study of criminal argots, the metaphorical use of terms previously well established in the language is much more common (Maurer 1973: 183). In the next months, I hope to extend my knowledge of this prison language and answer the questions and hypotheses posed in this paper.

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